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Building and maintaining networks: creating an effective online presence

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Introduction

Building and maintaining networks and partnerships can be exceptionally beneficial, both personally and professionally, especially for those entering into a profession, such as veterinary medicine. With the ubiquitous nature of technology, online networks are becoming ever more significant for professionals. However, this requires us to think more carefully, as to how we create an effective online presence; and as educators how we can support students.

E-professionalism

A number of professions require adherence to professional bodies codes of conduct, such as the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). As social media and apps are often embedded in our personal and potentially professional lives, we need to consider what it means to be 'online' and how we portray ourselves as 'professional'. Chester et al. (2013) argues that it is the role of educators to support students and promote e-professionalism.

e-Professionalism is the way you engage yourself online in relation to your profession, including your attitudes, actions and your adherence to relevant professional codes of conduct.

Methodology

In order to gain a better understanding on our students' online experiences, social media engagement, and support needs, at the University of Edinburgh, we undertook the following approach:

- **Surveys:** issued annually to ~10,000 students from across the University (2014-2019).
- **Interviews:** 6 students were interviewed in order to obtain greater depth of understanding from the first survey (2014).
- **Workshops:** social media in learning & teaching (academics); social media for research and impact (researchers); and creating an effective online presence (staff and students) - workshops run annually.
- **Being creative:** Vet students visually depicted their online presence, which highlights the potential visibility and variability (right).



Results

- **3,400** survey responses, with **168** responses from students at the Vet School; providing an insight into students' use of social media and their online experiences.

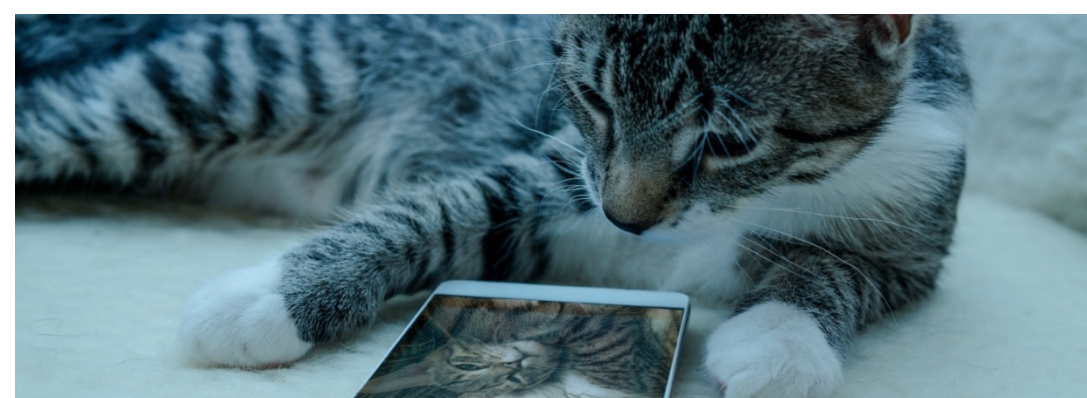
Undergraduate and postgraduate students at the Vet School, average % over the five surveys:

- **37%** used the professional networking platform, LinkedIn. This was significantly lower for undergraduates (**13%**) but varied depending on what year they were in.
- **73%** experienced online help or support from a peer
- **49%** experienced an approach for employment/volunteer opportunities.
- **54%** of undergraduate vet students stated they were aware of professional bodies' social media guidelines (surveys 2016, 2017, 2018). This number is relatively low and may be due to some students not yet receiving the lecture/information (first years) or they were unclear about the question.

Checklist

Checklist for creating an effective online presence:

- **Overview:** Think about your **audience, your purpose, and choice of social media platform** – how does your online presence change or need curated in relation to these areas?
- **Professional bodies:** read codes of conduct/social media guidelines.
- **Personal vs professional:** be clear to your audience if you are separating or blurring professional/personal personas.
- **Profiles:** Ensure profiles are updated and appropriate image is used for professional platforms such as LinkedIn.
- **Delete:** old or unwanted accounts
- **Engage:** Follow/share/engage with others to help build and maintain your networks.
- **Confidentiality & privacy:** maintain confidentiality of client data and manage your privacy settings on social media/apps.
- **Search:** for yourself online and tidy up/curate your online presence to suit your needs.



Conclusions and recommendations

The findings have helped us better understand student experiences and support needs in relation to being online/e-professionalism. The **checklist provides a first step** for all in the veterinary profession alongside the following recommendations for educators:

- **Embed e-professionalism** in the curriculum including real-life case studies of effective online presence and how this can be beneficial in the vet profession e.g. to build rapport with clients, networking opportunities, and sharing best practice.
- **Raise awareness** of how to create an effective online presence for networking via different platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn or professional forums and apps.
- **Continually review** the online environment (including apps), providing current support and advice.

Resources

- Digital Footprint MOOC (free 3 week course) <https://www.coursera.org/learn/digital-footprint> 
- Institute for Academic Development: Digital Footprint Service & resources www.ed.ac.uk/iad/digitalfootprint

References

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